

93RD SESSION OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR CONFERENCE GENEVA 2005

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South African employers welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of the Report of the Director General. The Report concisely and clearly articulates the key policy choices and challenges that face us, and in particular, the challenge of translating democracy and freedom into a better quality of life for all.

This challenge resonates with all South Africans, who a decade after the transition from apartheid to democracy, must confront daily the reality of joblessness and poverty in our society and on our continent. As employers we are especially conscious of the demands for a better quality of life at work for all people and the risks that a failure to deliver on that demand may pose.

Both prior to and since our transition to democracy, tripartism has played a key role in effecting political, social and economic transformation. For more than a decade, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) has provided the vehicle for social dialogue on a broad range of social and political issues. However, as the Report suggests, the existence of structures is not in itself a guarantee of meaningful dialogue. Tripartism is as much a commitment as it is an institution. If the roles and capacities of the social partners are devalued, it will become increasingly difficult to sustain the voice and influence of tripartism. The challenge presented by the Report, within the context of making decent work a global goal, is to invigorate tripartism. South African employers remain committed to meeting this challenge, at national level and within existing structures, and so to provide the basis for the development of appropriate approaches and interventions to our single most immediate and critical challenge- alleviating poverty through the creation of employment.

But we must recognise too that crises and challenges, whatever their magnitude, are not resolved solely by social dialogue or the formulation of policy through that process. Policies and programmes that flow from social dialogue require assessment of regulatory impact, implementation, continuous monitoring and if necessary, refinement. Policies adopted for the sake of adopting policy or some other untenable expedient pose the risk of constraining any potential growth in decent work opportunities, and compromise sound investment and macroeconomic strategies.

In short, effective and sustainable policy is best formulated through tripartism, but policy not translated into concrete action is neither effective nor sustainable.

In this context, South African employers welcome the debate, recently resurrected at national level, on labour market flexibility. The debate on youth employment being conducted during the current session of the Conference highlights the importance of this issue and the urgent need to find appropriate solutions. The rate of unemployment in South Africa has remained unacceptably high for many years, and as is the case in many developing economies, youth constitute more than 50% of the unemployed. The rate of unemployment is racially skewed, and disproportionately high amongst young women and those living in rural areas. Initiatives aimed at providing vocational training appear to have been met with limited success and have seldom addressed the bridge between formal education and training for the world of work.

The statutory authorities mandated to facilitate skills development through learnerships and skills programmes have failed to live up to expectation.

It is universally acknowledged that small and medium enterprises are best placed to create jobs, yet South African young people are not adequately advised on entrepreneurship, nor are they provided with basic business skills. There is a preoccupation with employment rather than a focus on self-employment. A promotion of self-employment would foster the prospect of decent work not only for entrepreneurs, but for others whom they in due course might acquire the capacity to employ.

Policy and programme deficiencies, co-operation and integration in the design and implementation of youth programmes and policies, and importantly, the appropriate standards and levels of legislative protection for youth workers are all matters that require urgent discussion and resolution. Existing resources need to be better utilised and co-ordinated to ensure that every young South African is given “a fair chance at a decent job.”

The reference in the Report to alternative possibilities for the form and style of the Conference are to be welcomed. Advances in technology appear to have left the Conference largely unaffected. The working methods of the various committees remain largely as they were decades ago, and the predictable set-piece engagements that play themselves out each year stand at odds with the demands for greater efficiencies in the way in which our work at the Conference is accomplished. Too often, the platform provided by the Conference is used to air debates which belong at home and not in an international forum. There appears to be a sense by some that the quantity rather than the quality of interventions determine the strength of arguments. Our time at the Conference is limited, and over the years, our workload has become more onerous. We would support an review of the form and style of the Conference to ensure that our work is carried out within constitutional constraints but with a greater degree of efficiency and effectiveness.

Finally, we welcome efforts to encourage the inclusion of more women in delegations to the Conference. South African employers are proud to have responded to these efforts, and are pleased this year to have met the suggested target.

Thank you